

January 27, 2019
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Annual Meeting Sunday
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

I'm not very up-to-date on pop culture. I just don't follow it very much. Therefore the name "Lady Gaga" meant very little to me until just a few months ago. Lady Gaga finally landed on my radar screen because of all the press around her performance in the latest remake of *A Star is Born*, for which she just received an Oscar nomination. As Wikipedia describes her, "Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, known professionally as Lady Gaga, is an American singer, songwriter, and actress. She is known for her unconventionality and provocative work, as well as visual experimentation."¹ Perhaps more impressively, she has leveraged her fame for philanthropic and activist causes such as natural disaster relief, youth empowerment, and LGBTQ+ rights.

Lady Gaga is also a Christian. I learned this only a couple of days ago, thanks to a CNN story heavily circulated among my clergy friends. The story reports Lady Gaga's comments about the Vice President's wife having taken a job at a Christian school that discriminates against gay faculty, parents, and students. It includes video of Lady Gaga on stage saying this about Mike Pence: "You are the worst representation of what it means to be a Christian ... I am a Christian woman, and what I do know about Christianity is that we bear no prejudice, and everybody is welcome."²

It says something about my expectations of over-the-top and in-your-face entertainers that I was *not* surprised to learn that Lady Gaga is bisexual, but *quite* surprised to learn that she is a Christian. I'm pretty sure that hip people aren't supposed to be Christian; I'm pretty sure that Christians aren't supposed to be hip. The folks at CNN know this; that's probably why the title of the story was this catchy tag line: "Christianity's future looks more like Lady Gaga than Mike Pence."

This is a new kind of press attention for Christianity. And there's more. In recent months I've seen a number of news articles about young evangelicals diverging from their parents on issues such as climate change, immigration, and gay rights. A November New York Times article about this was titled, "'God is Going to Have to Forgive Me': Young Evangelicals Speak Out."³ It may even be that these young evangelicals will nudge us to up our game.

Now, I can only *hope* that Christianity's *future* looks more like Lady Gaga than Mike Pence. But I'm pretty *certain* that Christianity's *origins* looked more like Lady Gaga than Mike Pence. I'm serious about that. Jesus was not a guy in a suit, working for "the man," shoring up systems that serve to prop up the powerful at the expense of the marginalized. Instead, Jesus was pretty much the opposite of that.

Our lectionary doesn't give us the story in order, so let me offer some context for today's Gospel reading. Luke begins with the following sequence of events: the baby Jesus' nativity, the tween Jesus in the Temple, John and his baptisms, Jesus' temptation in the desert, and then, bam, here we are today. Jesus is in his hometown synagogue, reading from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus tops it off with this: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Let me be very clear: in context, this is seriously radical stuff, more outrageously fabulous than anything Lady Gaga has done, and Luke puts it right up front, in his first depiction of Jesus in public ministry. Jesus is the messiah, sent in service to God's favor for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. This is the Good News, and Jesus spells it out, clearly, but provocatively. It's Isaiah with a Jesus twist, and therefore it's both very old and brand new. In an action that's sort of "back to the future," Jesus reaches into the past, grabs the sweet center of his faith; he dusts it off and sets it on the horizon of the future as both goal and promise. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus will keep returning to this basic theme: caring for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.

It's Annual Meeting Sunday. To help encourage you to stay, I'm keeping this short. If you stay, you're going to hear that we have a lot of work to do as a parish—that we need to shore up parish finances and build structures that support lay ministry. Some of it may be hard to hear. It may feel daunting and discouraging. If so, remember this: we're here to follow Jesus and find God. Everything we do is in service to the Gospel, and the Gospel is this: caring for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. That sweet center of the faith is our future. It is in service to the Gospel that we will always find our joy.

A very fun image came across my Facebook feed last week. It was a t-shirt, a t-shirt that would be worn by someone who has a gay uncle. Printed across the top were the words "Your Uncle" and "My Uncle." Beneath the words were simple drawings. Under "Your Uncle" was a plain-looking horse, tan with a brown tail, just standing there. Under "My Uncle" was a unicorn, white with a rainbow-colored mane, doing a pole dance.⁴ It made me wish that I'd had a gay uncle when I was growing up.

That t-shirt is fun, but the fun is built on a serious truth: it used to be pretty risky to be gay and out. Sometimes it still is. Look a little harder at that t-shirt, and you'll see that the rainbow unicorn can be read as code, code for courage that is manifested with boldness and joy and hope.

It is in service to the Gospel that we will always find our joy. But we mainliners can be so dour. It occurs to me that our default Jesus is much like “Your Uncle”: a plain-looking horse, tan with a brown tail, just standing there. But what if Jesus was like “My Uncle”: a brave rainbow-maned white unicorn, not only dancing, but also singing and throwing glitter. That’s the uncle I want. That’s the savior I can follow: Jesus the Christ, fully human, fully divine, and outrageously fabulous.

Notes

¹ “Lady Gaga,” Wikipedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Gaga (accessed January 25, 2019).

² Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, “Christianity’s future looks more like Lady Gaga than Mike Pence,” January 24, 2019, CNN online, available at https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/24/opinions/christianitys-future-looks-more-like-lady-gaga-than-mike-pence-graves-fitzsimmons/index.html?fbclid=IwAR2jfAuVmDoCzRtUy9MvqcQyL262g3J6F7kuqOzraYbVeIC_oAJRj_X03J4 (accessed January 25, 2019).

³ Elizabeth Dias, “‘God Is Going to Have to Forgive Me’: Young Evangelicals Speak Out,” November 1, 2018, *The New York Times* online, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/us/young-evangelicals-politics-midterms.html> (accessed January 25, 2019).

⁴ See, for example, the t-shirt for sale on Teemoonly, available at https://teemoonly.com/products/unicorn-your-uncle-my-uncle-shirt?variant=19088339632197&gclid=EAJaIQobChMIjpWP-P2M4AIVwVYNCh2vNwPOEAQYASABEgIEY_D_BwE (accessed January 25, 2019).

